Article

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All touristy places and coastal resorts especially present themselves as places of extraordinary pleasure. They are meant to save their visitors from their mundane lives and locate them in a paradise-like world. This is reflected in some natural features of the resorts, most importantly beaches, as well as specific architecture, such as piers, promenades, fun-fairs, casinos and ballrooms, whose function is to provide pleasure or even to put their users in an ecstatic state. However, while there is one side of the seaside resorts for visitors, there is also another one which is for those who live in the resorts all year round and often earn their living by serving the visitors. In recent years this side of resorts received much attention in Britain; probably more than the attractions they offer to their visitors, although, of course, these two aspects of economy and culture are closely connected. One can find numerous articles about social problems haunting British coastal resorts, especially Blackpool, such as the high number of prescriptions issued for anti-depressants per capita, the low full-time average wage in the UK (O'Connor), having some of the most deprived neighbourhoods in England ("England's most deprived areas..."), and low male life expectancy in England ("JSNA Blackpool").

In the light of these problems it is not surprising that many of those who can, leave the sorts, to seek a better life elsewhere, leading a BBC journalist to state that "young people might disappear from England's seaside towns" (Rhodes). Such a statement is exaggerated, but it points to the fact that those who stay in resorts are usually deprived of better options and it is likely that their lives are blighted by the same problems that are encountered by the older population, and probably even more so, given the greater sensitivity of children and young people. The question I wish to pose is whether some recent British films, set in the coastal resorts, confirm the negative perception of coastal resorts as unfriendly towards

permanent residents and those who find themselves there not by choice, but by necessity. I am also interested in the way three of these films *Jellyfish* (2018), directed by James Gardner, *Vs.* (2018), directed by Ed Lilly and *Eaten by Lions* (2018), directed by Jason Wingard reflect wider discourses about England, concerning class and race. In focusing on these films, I also consider their production values, characters, stories and location and draw on the existing research on coastal resorts and their cinematic representations, Erving Goffman's taxonomy of spaces into "front" and "back regions" and Mikhail Bakhtin's concept of the carnivalesque.

New coastal resort films

British films set in coastal resorts belong to a variety of styles and genres. Among them we find realistic films and fantasy films; adventure films, comedies, social dramas and even war films. untill recently, these films adhered to a specific order in representing places and characters, that is, the spaces in these films were strictly divided between Goffman's "front" ands "back" regions. The front is the meeting place of hosts and guests or customers and service personnel, and the back is the place to which members of the "home team" retire between performances to relax and to prepare. Examples of back regions are kitchens, boiler rooms, and executive washrooms, and examples of front regions are reception offices, parlors, and the like. Although architectural arrangements are mobilized to support this division, it is primarily a social one, based on the type of social performance that is staged in a place, and on the social roles found there (109-112).

In the bulk of coastal films tourists and holidaymakers are cast as main characters and they are located in "'front" regions. They attend variety shows and gliding competitions, walk the promenades, visit fun-fairs and have their palms read by fortune-tellers. The locals work in "back" regions, preparing spectacles and meals for them and enter front regions only to cater for their needs. (It is unlikely for locals to behave like tourists in their own town.) If

tourists venture to back regions, this happens by accident or mistake and is presented as an aberration rather than a norm, typically leading to humorous situations, such as in *Sing As We Go* (1934), directed by Basil Dean. This trespassing in fact maintains the division between front and back regions.

By contrast, in these three films, the principal roles are afforded to locals or to people who moved to coastal resorts semi-permanently. Rather than hiding in the back regions, or boldly moving to front regions, they dwell in places that do not fit such descriptions, but which belong to everybody or are on the boundary where front and back become blurred. By the same token, these films try to provide visibility to people and problems that normally remain hidden. It can be argued that "backyard" of the resorts are used here to represent wider problems afflicting British people, such as poverty, breakdown of families or the lack of prospects for young people.

All three films were made by directors who made their debut in full-length fiction film. Although this does not fully explain why they decided to focus on the "kitchen area" and "no-man's land" of the resorts, it can be argued that such a choice is advantageous to low budget productions, which is typically the case of first-time directors, because the back regions are simple and unadorned. This setting also links them to the style of socialist realism, which admittedly prevails among left-leaning British directors, such as Tony Richardson and Ken Loach. By contrast, more established directors who work with higher budgets, can afford to focus on lavish spectacles, taking place in front regions as is the case in *Miss Peregrine's Home for Peculiar Children* (2016), directed by Tim Burton and *Yesterday* (2019) by Danny Boyle, made concurrently with the three films discussed in this article. The latter film, for example, includes lavish performances of Beatles' songs by the main character and original productions of Ed Sheeran.

The power of spectacle

The three films focus on underprivileged young people whose difficult position is a consequence of their unfortunate family situation. Fifteen-year old Sarah in *Jellyfish* lives with her mother and two younger siblings in Margate, but her mother does not look after any of her children and is a burden for Sarah, who is left in charge of running the household. The teenager has to look after her brother and sister and make sure the mother does not squander the money she earns, working in the arcade, cleaning the machines and performing sexual "hand jobs" on older men. Adam in *Vs.*, after being abandoned by his mother, spent most of his life in foster care, moving from one temporary home to the next, and eventually ending up in Southend where his mother lives and works as a hairdresser. Omar and Pete, teenage step-brothers in *Eaten by Lions*, go to Blackpool after the death of their grandmother, who was their carer, following the death of Pete's parents who were eaten by lions. The purpose of their trip is to find Omar's estranged father.

In all these cases living or moving to a resort is presented not as a positive choice, but as a consequence of unfortunate circumstances. The resorts thus act as a trap for them. The feeling of entrapment and disappointment is conveyed most conspicuously by Sarah in *Jellyfish*, who in her stand-up comedy act, delivered in front of an audience made up of the inhabitants of Margate, which is a final project in her drama class, lists all the deprivations she suffered in Margate, including having to work rather than going to school and being raped by her employer. She finishes her performance by saying that she has had enough of the town. Subsequently Sarah runs from the stage, takes her bike and boards a train, most likely to go to London, but leaves before the train departs. It is impossible to determine whether she decides to stay out of concern for her siblings, because she realized that leaving Margate will not solve her problems or because she discovered her vocation as a stand-up comedian.

Adam in *Vs.* is presented as an angry young man, who feels let down by practically everybody: his mother who put him into foster care and his carers, for whom he is just a task to fulfil, and he expresses his rage by smashing the furniture and other objects in his apartment. He continues his angry behavior in Southend, where he meets Makayala, a young black woman who is working in an arcade. She takes an interest in Adam and introduces him to the rap battle scene in her town. Consequently, like Sarah, he finds a way to channel his anger into creative endeavor. Also, in common with Sarah, his audience are the inhabitants of the resort; those who are tourists in the town are excluded from the show. Moreover, the performers and the audience are constantly changing places; this is the rule of the rap battle. Rather than waiting to be noticed by any audience in the "front region," the characters merge the front and back region, taking possession of both.

Finally, in *Eaten by Lions*[1] Omar and Pete do not appropriate any straightforward performing identities. Neither do they go to any official performances. However, their trip to Blackpool is presented as a kind of a multi-layered performance, in which the boys are in turn the audience and the actors. First they are the audience, when they go to a clairvoyant who – like every fortune teller – pretends to know the past and the future. It turns out that the man does indeed know something about the boys' circumstances and is able to help them to trace Omar's family. Another example is their trip to the hotel, whose owner meets them in a fancy dressing gown and behaves in a very camp way. Yet, this turns out to be his usual appearance. Finally, we observe a kind of theatre in the house of Omar's Pakistani relatives. First, the relatives look at the boys as if they were some kind of spectacle, being so different from them, and their gaze is reciprocated: the boys look back at the relatives, acknowledging their difference and distance. The positioning of the guests and hosts as the providers and recipients of the spectacle is emphasized by the composition of the frame, camerawork and dialogue. Both groups are placed in the centre of the frame, and are at a significant distance

from each other, as is the case with the actors and the audience in the theatre, and the "Pakistani group" looks as if it is posing for a family photograph. Initially, we do not see them together; we see either one group or the other. This separation reflects the organization of the theatre, where the stage and the audience are divided. The two groups of people are shown in a long shot, which increases the distance between them. At some point Pete takes things from his pocket, as if he were a magician, saying "exhibit 1", "exhibit 2" and asking "can people at the back hear me?", which is a question one expects to hear during a performance rather than at a family gathering. The sense that we are observing two alternating performances, one offered by the hosts, one by the guests, is augmented when Omar's father appears on the "scene". He is singing and dancing as he enters his brother's house as if he was a pop star, given his shiny clothes, complete with golden buttons adorning his jacket, golden chain and "Mohican" hairstyle. Such an appearance is in contrast to his relatives who wear traditional Pakistani attire. He is met with his audience's enjoyment mixed with exasperation. When the family moves to the kitchen, the stage-audience dynamic is maintained, with the guests on one side of the table and the hosts on the other, despite the fact that the space is tighter in the kitchen than in a sitting room. Gradually, however, the physical distance between the performers and the audience is reduced and the roles are reversed more frequently, especially one of the daughters of the Pakistani family, Parveen and Pete. The girl pretends to be mute, because – as she reveals to Pete – nobody pays attention to her. To get Pete's full attention, she starts to create mini- spectacles for his enjoyment, such as playing with her fan or putting a finger in her mouth, which obviously has erotic connotations, before stealing his grandfather's flashy car and driving with Pete to the beach and then to the town center.

These multiple spectacles signal the alienation of the young characters (and on occasion also the older ones), who are ignored, misunderstood and even abused by their families and friends, as well as a way to draw attention to their plight and to take possession of their surroundings. Their goal is achieved during the course of the narratives – the spectacles are successful – the performers and the audience are moved by them, although often they don't enjoy them in a straightforward way. Yet, a spectacle is, by its very nature, staged and short; it is not a "normal" reality and thus can be easily ignored and forgotten. This fact was first recognized by Bakhtin in his writings about the "carnival," understood as a special place and time when people can reject censorship and live their wildest desires:

> As opposed to the official feast, one might say that carnival celebrated temporary liberation from the prevailing truth and from the established order; it marked the suspension of all hierarchical rank, privileges, norms, and prohibitions. Carnival was the true feast of time, the feast of becoming, change and renewal. It was hostile to all that was immortalized and completed... This temporary suspension, both ideal and real, of hierarchical rank created during carnival time a special type of communication impossible in everyday life. This led to the creation of special forms of marketplace speech and gesture, free and frank, permitting no distance between those who came in contact with each other and liberating from norms of etiquette and decency imposed at other times. A special carnivalesque, marketplace style of expression was formed which we find abundantly represented in Rabelais' novel. (199).

The ultimate purpose of a carnival is to be a safety valve, ensuring that the normal order prevails and, ultimately, nothing changes. From this perspective each film offers us a different scenario,. In the case of *Jellyfish* the performance is a turning point, because it makes Sarah's teacher realize the deprivations and abuses she suffered. We can assume that

she would not return to her previous life even if she stayed in Margate. For Adam, spectacle comes across as a means to both alleviate his disappointments and grievances, related to his neglect by his mother and amplify them.

> All his rage and alienation are alchemised into brilliant rhymes. He knows how to stand his ground when his opponent gets right in his face with the nastiest jeers. But his case workers are worried. Is this a miracle? All his anger magically transformed into something non-violent and creative? Or is Adam developing a dangerous new addiction to confrontation that will keep the violence alive in his heart when it should be dying away? Everything comes to a head when his rap contests appear alongside confrontations with his mum, and his head-butting rage becomes ever more painful. (Bradshaw)

Finally, the spectacles in which Pete and Omar participate allow them to gain more independence from each other thanks to engaging with other people, Omar with Amy, the white employee of the Aquarium and Pete with the Asian girl Parveen are testing new identities. Eventually they come together and decide to live together again, but on this occasion such a decision is a result of their choice rather than necessity.

Class and race

Films set in coastal resorts typically include an element of romance, which is often combined with a motif of self-discovery. For example, in *Hindle Wakes* the main female character has an affair with an upper-class man and at the same time realizes that she does not need a man to be fulfilled; indeed, she prefers to remain independent. In *Sing As We Go* Grace is attracted to her boss, but he falls for an upper-class girl from London. In these early films class difference is a crucial issue affecting the chance of romance that renders it impossible or difficult to happen.

In these three films class position is an important problem for the characters, as they are absolutely or relatively poor, but it is not the problem in them forging close relations with other people. Significantly, however, they build these relationships with people of different skin color than themselves. In *Vs* the white Adam is first looked after by a black social worker and then becomes enchanted by the black and charismatic Makayala, who recognizes his talent as a rapper and helps him to channel his anger into art. In *Eaten by Lions* Omar develops a friendship with the white girl working for the Aquarium and Pete with a Pakistani girl. In *Jellyfish* Sarah is first challenged by her black drama teacher to prepare something to perform in front of an audience and eventually saved by him, as he turns out to be the only person who understands her predicament and – as we can guess – is able to help her. In some cases there is an element of an erotic attraction, in particular Adam is attracted to Makayala, but this attraction is played down in the narrative or does not lead to erotic fulfilment, because the difference in age, sexual orientation or due to one of the characters being engaged elsewhere. The focus is on "rescuing" the vulnerable youngster, so that he or she does not sink into depression or self-destructive anger. Moreover, in *Jellyfish* and *Vs* people of color come across as more noble than their white counterparts, because they do not take advantage of the vulnerable youngsters, such as Sarah's white boss who rapes her or a man whom she meets in a pub, who wants to use her as a prostitute. These people make up for their parents, who neglected or abandoned them.

In *Eaten by Lions* Pete's white aunt and her husband agree to look after him following the death of Pete's parents, but the aunt turns out to be unkind and racist, making Omar feel that he is unwelcome in her house. She also makes racist comments when visiting Omar's family in Blackpool. Omar's family, ultimately, turns out to be more sympathetic to Pete and understanding of the fact that the two step-brothers don't want to be separated.

In idealizing people of color and criticizing white people, especially middle-aged white men the films promote what is termed “diversity” and “multiculturalism,” ideals promoted by many cultural institutions, including academia and the liberal media, such as *The Guardian*, which dismiss criticism of ethnic minorities as racist and, at the same time, play up the faults of the white majority. In a wider sense the focus on race as opposed to class can be regarded as a reflection of the dominance of identity politics in Britain in recent decades, at the expense of class politics (Mazierska 2-3).

It is likely that presenting white women as irresponsible parents and white men as sexual abusers, while people of color are the saviors of the vulnerable white youngsters, helped producers of these films obtain funding and secure positive reviews, or at least, presenting somebody like Sarah as a victim of Muslim-dominated grooming gangs, would prevent the script from reaching the stage of screening.

While lamenting the fate of young people in coastal resorts, the films conspicuously omit the issue of the economic opportunities for people living in the resorts, which in reality are very limited, as I previously mentioned, leading to the exodus of young people from there or the low support offered to families with children. In *Jellyfish*, in particular, the blame for having little to eat and being at risk of having electricity cut off is put squarely on Sarah’s reckless mother, who is too lazy to turn up to collect her unemployment benefits. Thus she comes across as a single mother who has children to sponge off the state, as demonized by Margaret Thatcher during her rule.

Location

In his seminal book about working-class life, *The Uses of Literacy*, Richard Hoggart observes:

> Most working-class pleasures tend to be mass-pleasures, over-crowded and sprawling. Everybody wants to have fun at the same time, since most buzzers blow within an hour of each other. Special occasions – a wedding, a trip to the pantomime, a visit to the fair, a charabane outing – assume this, and assume also that a really special splendour and glitter must be displayed. (120-21)

The films set in coastal resorts, made before the Second World War, such as *Sing As We Go*, *Hindles Wake* and, to some extent, *No Lady* (1930), directed by Lupino Lane, follow this rule. They show crowds of people indulging in ephemeral pleasures, such as visiting fairgrounds and eating candy floss. On such occasions most of the joy results from being together, either with friends from one's factory or meeting new people, as during the working week such opportunities are limited.

Films belonging to Free Cinema and New Wave in the 1950s still showed the communal pleasures, but increasingly they became represented critically, as sites of the degeneration of working-class culture and discord, such as *O Dreamland* (1954) by Lindsay Anderson, *A Taste of Honey* (1961), directed by Tony Richardson and *Saturday Night and Sunday Morning* (1960), directed by Karel Reisz. John Hill observes that

> The Blackpool amusements sequence in *A Taste of Honey*, for example, is practically a reprise of Anderson's *O Dreamland*. There is exactly the same emphasis on degrading spectacle and its culturally repellent mix of prurience, ghoulishness and pseudo-art […] Like *O Dreamland*, the characters themselves are made to look grotesque, stuffing themselves with food, matching their heads to model cavemen's bodies, disfiguring themselves in front of distorting mirrors. And, in a practical steal, there is a cut from the close-up of a woman's face to a model clown in a glass cage, linked by their mutually repulsive laughter. (152-53)

My own impression of the way the resort pleasures are represented is less critical and Hill's critical assessment of such scenes might betray his own prejudice against what Hoggart describes as a typical working-class taste, marked by affinity to bright colors, ornamentation, and distortion. What is important from my perspective is that in the New Wave films excursions to funfairs illuminates and adds discord within families. This is most conspicuously presented in *A Taste of Honey*, where Jo is offended and disgusted by her mother's gravitating towards her lover and leaving her behind. In the 1990s and later we find more films set after the season, in large part to point to the desolation of once thriving resorts and, by the same token, the decline and disappearance of working class culture. From this perspective *Last Resort* (2000) by Pawel Pawlikowski constitutes a prime example, with a title which speaks for itself.

The films discussed in this article borrow from the earlier films, but do not fit any of these models. They do not show thriving resorts, full of tourists, but neither do they present the coastal towns as deserted. There are people in places where the characters venture, but not crowds, and typically the people whom they meet are not tourists. We find, for example, a school and a job center in *Jellyfish*, and a non-descript residential area in *Eaten by Lions*, which in part reflects the fact that the characters are themselves not tourists, hence they do not go to the places that tourists frequent and if they do go there, it happens "after-hours". An example is Omar and his female friend's evening visit to Blackpool beach, where they are by themselves, playing and going to the aquarium, when it is locked. When the characters go to the "temples of instant gratification," where tourists congregate, they are alienated from their surroundings. For example, Omar and Pete visit a shop with tacky souvenirs, managed by Omar's father, who shows the boys a pen with an Asian woman who takes off her clothes.

Another example is Sarah and her family going to Dreamland in *Jellyfish*. The attraction is not entirely deserted, but has only a few visitors. What is important, is that it is not a site of after-work pleasure, but a place where Sarah's mother goes instead of work and, in the case of children, education, on Sarah's mother's insistence. Because of this undeserved pleasure, Sarah does not enjoy the trip and it ends badly, as it makes Sarah rush and entrust her mother with paying the bills, which the mother fails to do, instead buying a van to go on holiday. The scene in Dreamland brings to mind that in *A Taste of Honey*, as in both films it is a mother rather than the teenage daughter who shows an excessive appetite for fun. The rollercoaster in this film with its circular route and predetermined ending points to Sarah's entrapment in Margate.

Unlike the characters in earlier films, the protagonists of these three "teenage" films don't search for crowds, but avoid them, choosing places where there are few people, such as beaches and promenades. Beaches constitute an attraction for tourists, but typically they are not purpose-built and they are free for everybody. From this perspective they do not belong solely to tourists and they are not divided into front and back regions. In the case of Omar, a trip to the beach constitutes a life-changing experience, as he discovers freedom in rambling through an empty space. For Sarah a beach does not have such a transformative character, but the only time when she comes across as a careless child is when she is looking at a beach from the promenade with her younger sister and brother and threw some seaweed at a kissing couple and then ran away.

A promenade, like a beach, is a liminal space not only because it connects (or divides) life and death, nature and culture, but also because it connects the tourists and the natives; everybody can walk the promenade. A promenade is perhaps the most important location in these films, because the characters enter it in a moment of crisis, usually after a dramatic

event. Sarah, for example, runs from the house of a man who tried to have sex with her; another is Adam finding himself on a promenade after a confrontation with his mother, where he accused her of abandoning him. One can expect that they might commit suicide, given that on the other side of the promenade is the sea, with its association with death. This is recognized by Omar, who scatters the ashes of his grandmother on the promenade and is reprimanded for it by a policeman. However, nothing as dramatic happens; the walk along the promenade leads the characters to a better place, metaphorically speaking. Adam, for example, meets there a single mother with whom he has sex. Long takes and long shots used in such scenes underscore the loneliness and izolation of the young characters, as it points to the distance between them and other people who might venture there.

Another characteristic of the location in these films is their fragmentation. We never see the whole city, only fragments and it is impossible to determine how different locations are connected with each other. In *Eaten by Lions* and *Jellyfish* at some points certain locations are frozen, adding to the sense of them being disjointed. Such fragmentation can be interpreted as a sign that the characters are unable to "possess" the towns where they dwell; they are neither tourists, nor locals. The in-between status of the resorts, between the polarity of thriving and dying, serving the tourists and the natives, is underscored by the difficulty of establishing the season in which a given film is set. The characters typically walk in casual comfortable clothes, such as hoodies and trousers. It is never hot summer but, equally, it is not autumn or winter. It feels like the time is not good enough to stay, but not bad enough to leave.

Conclusion

The three films discussed here recognize the difficult situation of young people living in coastal resorts, as demonstrated by their exodus, making British resorts the domain of older people, largely on low income. At the same time, they try to show ways by which the young who cannot leave might improve their situation, pointing to performance as a privileged means to make the town their own. They also focus on forging inter-racial relations as a means to overcome problems in white families. What is also characteristic about films under consideration is their inconclusiveness. In part, this can be seen as testimony to their status as arthouse and realistic films, shunning happy endings typical to Hollywood films, but in part also as a reflection of the situation of their characters and, by extension, of thousands of young people like them, who do not want to stay in their hometown resorts, but have nowhere to go.

Notes

1. The title of the film might be a reference to Stanley Holloway's 1932 recording of a comic monologue with musical accompaniment, *The Lion and Albert.* It begins*, "*There's a famous seaside place called Blackpool, that's noted for fresh air and fun". It goes on to tell the story of a small child being eaten by a lion at Blackpool zoo, a narrative whose ostensible horror is humorously undercut by the phlegmatic, matter-of-fact pragmatism of the cast of working-class characters.

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